

February 12, 2026

Dear Shearith Israel family,

Our Year of Allegiance. Scheduled for *next* Shabbat, February 21, there is one lecture left in Rabbi Soloveichik's 10-lecture Squintennial series. Before then we will be observing Shabbat Shekalim this Shabbat (the first of the four special Shabbatot this time of year; see my [email of 3/6/25](#)) and Rosh Hodesh Adar on Monday night through Wednesday. We seem to have come out of one of the longest recorded spells of below-freezing days. We have weathered it.

Trees Please. My Tu B'Shvat message of happy poems and scary figures of killing trees by the millions per day each got a reaction. On the happy side, Joel Schreiber – whom we miss – reminds us of a beautiful poem about a tree that he wrote and that we discussed in our email of [9/17/20](#). Here it is, [again](#), for your enjoyment.

On the subject of felling trees to make room (in the main) for livestock grazing and feeding, Roger Mesznik, who studied the issue, puts the number of trees destroyed daily at between 2.7-5 million. This is down considerably from my estimate of 16 million trees daily, but, as Roger says, his is still a mind-bogglingly “awful” number. And I think that when we are considering tree downing for livestock grazing and feeding, I think our numbers are close.

Claude Nadaf, on the other hand, puts the daily number at between 41-42 million. And in case I wanted the source (which I do, for all these numbers that vary by an order of magnitude), Claude waives away the whole project. On the suggestion that our Torah and Tanach or Talmud are green oriented, Claude just says:

All a stretch. No biblical source nor biblical rationalization is in order. Tu B'Shvat was originally a tithe (tax) deadline when in the land of Israel later homiletically expanded as nostalgia. Leave me alone.

Faith for Food. We continue our community project to support Masbia's efforts, with the help of Doordash, to distribute food to our neighbors in Manhattan who are hungry or food insecure. This week, we helped feed 60 families. We still need your help – we will continue to need your help until the scourge of hunger is eradicated, as it can be. Please help - [click here](#).

Name that Haftarah Tune. We are now collecting tunes for the final seven parshiot of Sefer Shemot: **Parshiot Mishpatim (this week's, which is Parashat Shekalim), Terumah, Tetzaveh, Ki-Tisa, and Vayakel-Pekudai** (read together this year).

The **Haftarah for Parashat Mishpatim** that is sung when it is not Parashat Shekalim is from Jeremiah 34:8-22 and 33:25-26. As Andrew Druck summarizes it, the “Haftarah chastises Israel for not following the commandment to free the slave. [The haftarah notes that] they freed the slaves and then enslaved them again”. On this theme Andrew suggests:

- [Freedom](#), sung by Richie Havens (at Woodstock)
- [You Ain't Goin Nowhere](#), sung by Bob Dylan
- [Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine](#), sung by Bob Dylan
- [Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again](#), sung by Bob Dylan
- [Expecting to Fly](#), sung by Neil Young
- [Deliver Me](#), sung by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (great song, great suggestion)

All these but the Dylans are great songs. The haftarah that we read this Shabbat, though, special to Parashat Shekalim, is taken from 2 Kings 11:17-20 and 12:1-17. It speaks of the reign of King Yehoash; in particular, well, it speaks of money, money, money. After a period of 23 years the money allocated for improvement of the Temple had still not been used for the necessary Temple repairs, so Yehoash devised a system to get the funds straight into the hands of the workers, the builders, the tradesmen. Things seem to have gone on more smoothly after that.

My suggestion for this haftarah is the obvious and great song from *Magic Christian*,

- [Come and Get It](#), sung by Badfinger (written by Paul McCartney); and also
- [Money, Money, Money](#), by ABBA

When Bad Things Happen to Good People. The topic is older than the life and book of Job. Yet look at how the Talmud treats it, in a most memorable passage in this week's Talmud readings.

This week, the global Daf Yomi learning cycle is learning pages 28-34 of Tractate Menachot. Page 29b includes the extraordinary *aggadata* or moral tale of Moshe and R' Akiva. It is justly famous, and unforgettable.

The story begins with Moshe seeing The Almighty tying crowns on the letters of the Torah (called *tagin*). Moshe asks why, and The Almighty answers that there will be a Rabbi in the future who will be able to discern untold insights from them. That Rabbi, of course, was Rabbi Akiva. Wanting to know more, Moshe is transported to a lecture given by Rabbi Akiva oh 1500 years in the future. Moshe does not understand much of what is being taught and becomes crest-fallen – until he hears Rabbi Akiva answer a question by invoking Moshe and his teachings.

It would take a week to unpack the subtlety and wisdom of this short tale. But the story and the lesson to be learned go deeper. The story continues:

חזר ובא לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, אמר לפניו: רבוננו של עולם, יש לך אדם כזה ואתה נותן תוכה על ידי? אמר לו:
שתוק, כך עלה במחשבה לפני

Moses returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said before Him: Master of the Universe, You have a man as great as this [i.e., Rabbi Akiva], and yet You still choose to give the Torah

through me. Why? God said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me [Schottenstein renders the explanation “this is part of My greater plan to which you are not privy”].

Ok, so we can almost fathom this answer. Moshe had his own greatness – indeed there has been none greater spiritually. Yet there is a limit to his understanding – as there is to any human being’s.

And then the dialogue goes further:

אָמַר לַפָּנִים: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, הֲרֵאִיתִנִּי תוֹרָתוֹ, הֲרֵאִנִּי שְׂכָרוֹ. אָמַר לוֹ: חֲזוּר. חֲזַר לְאַחֲרָיו, רָאָה שֶׁשׁוֹקֵלִין בְּשָׂרָה בְּמַקּוּלַיִן. אָמַר לַפָּנִים: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, זֶה תוֹרָה וְזוֹ שְׂכָרָהּ? אָמַר לוֹ: שְׁתוֹק, כִּי עַלֶּה בְּמַחְשְׁבָה לַפָּנִי.

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, You have shown me Rabbi Akiva’s Torah, now show me his reward. God said to him: Return to where you were. Moses went back and saw that they were weighing Rabbi Akiva’s flesh in a butcher shop, as Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans. Moses said before Him: Master of the Universe, this is Torah and this is its reward? God said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

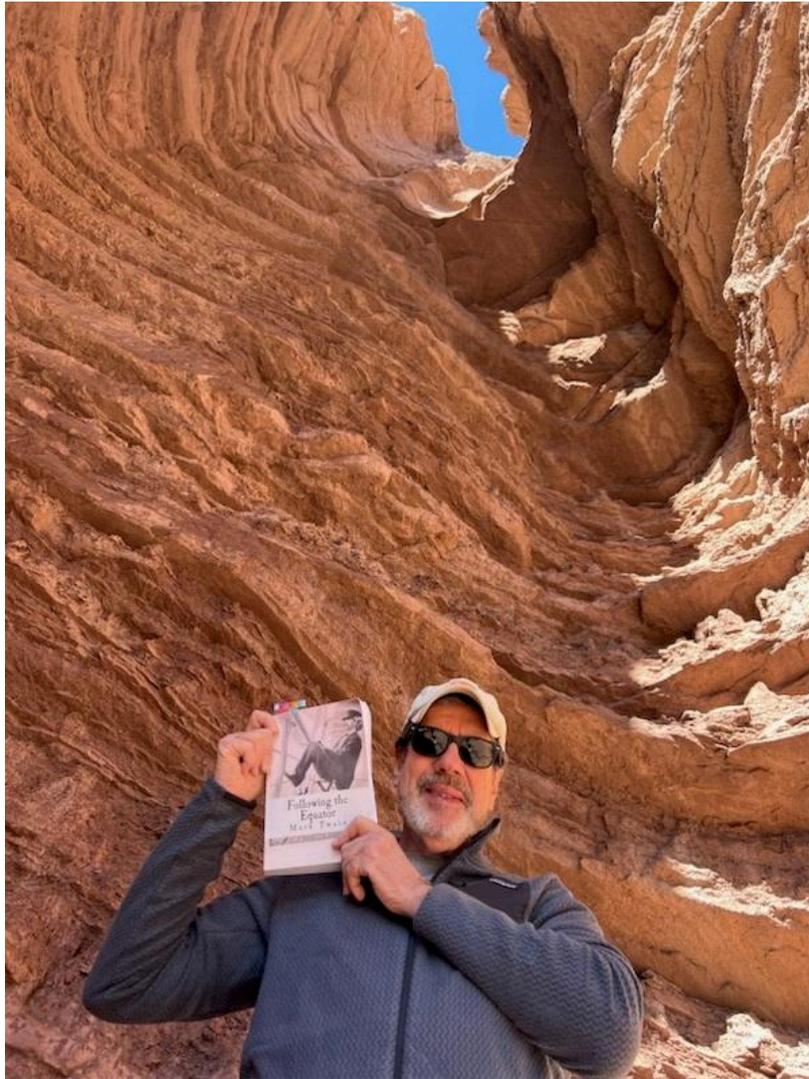
The waters here are deep indeed; this last piece dares the bottom of the whole matter. We have observed before that the toleration of evil is necessary if there is to be free will, the basic building block of being human. But mostly nobody loves that answer (I don’t, anyway). We have in these related stories human beings’ quest for knowledge, quest for meaning, but ultimately the faith that is essential to understanding the universe and our place in it. This in a half-dozen lines of Talmudic text.

Siyyum HaTwain (#22). Here is the list of the Twain works that the Shearith Israel Twain Book Club is reading ([link to email of Dec. 25, 2025](#)). This week, we can thank Madelene Towne for summarizing *Is Shakespeare Dead* (#22 on our list):

Is Shakespeare Dead? is a mistle for a somewhat amusing but ultimately showboating essay relying on Lewis Carroll-like syllogisms to prove that Shakespeare was not the author of the plays attributed to him. Syllogism one: There is no proof that Shakespeare was educated; Only an educated person (particularly one educated in the law) could write Shakespeare’s plays; Therefore, Shakespeare didn’t write his plays. Syllogism two: Francis Bacon was a lawyer; Francis Bacon was a good writer; Therefore, Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays. Along the way, Twain, who himself had no schooling past age twelve (did anyone ever question whether Mark Twain wrote Mark Twain?), writes extensively about his experiences working on a Mississippi steamboat, his cleverness as a writer and the publicity he achieved as an author and lecturer.

In the end, [Twain] undermines his entire argument by asking what right does he have to claim that Shakespeare didn’t write his own plays, while simultaneously asserting that it is essentially impossible to convince anyone to change one’s mind on a firmly-entrenched idea— in this case, the firmly-entrenched idea that Shakespeare is the author of his plays. All in all, this decidedly tongue-in-cheek essay is much ado about nothing.

So you see, Madelene loved the book. On a more upbeat note, Esther and Billy Schulder are taking one of their fantabulous vacations, this one to the Far South, including to the Atacama desert, Patagonia, and Antarctica! Look at this pic from the desert, “Domeyko mountain range; close to San Pedro de Atacama”, says Billy. Billy points out that it’s not “near the equator” (which even I knew), but even so, *look* at what Billy is reading:



We can’t wait to read Billy’s reactions to the book (which I’m just finishing – it’s terrific; don’t let Madelene touch it).

In this, our ***Year of Allegiance***, let us couple our collective ***commitment*** with a prayer to The Almighty, ***Hatzlich'ana, help us succeed.***

Louis Solomon, Parnas